

A SMALL PIECE OF TURQUOISE

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My friend, who I will call Tashi, told me this story about running away from his home in the grasslands of Trika, to Lhasa. I've embellished certain aspects of the story, but also left out certain events. Although based on reality, this story should be considered fictional.

Through the long dreary days of another semester at school, I had become fixated on the idea of going to Lhasa. But how could I tell my parents? I decided to wait for the upcoming holiday, and thought long and hard about what I would say to them.

When I got home from the boarding school where I was studying, my parents asked me about my studies. As she always did whenever I came from school for the holidays, Mother made a big meal of beef dumplings, my favorite food.

While we were having dinner, I told them my plan for the summer holiday.

"What did you say?" Father said suspiciously.

"I want to go to a monastery to study Tibetan during the summer vacation," I said bravely.

At first, Father didn't agree. "Don't lie to me. Boys always want to do this and that. If you want to study, you should study in school and at home. Why do you want to go to a monastery to study?" Father asked impatiently.

"It's really different there. There are many scholars in the monastery. But in school..." I started.

Father interrupted, "I know that – don't talk so much!"

The house was very quiet for a moment. Mother then gently spoke to Father, emphasizing how helpful and important studying in the monastery would be for me. He didn't say anything. Our house grew still again.

Finally, Father said, "OK, it's up to you."

Three days later, I went to Trika County Town and then

immediately boarded a bus for Ziling. We reached the city in the late afternoon, as the sun was setting behind tall buildings. I looked out the window. It was my first time to travel so far from home. I was amazed to see so many different buildings. Some seemed as tall as the mountains in my village. There were more vehicles in Ziling than my hometown had livestock. People swarmed on the roads and around buildings like ants in the summer. I couldn't recognize any Tibetans in the crowd. Everyone seemed Chinese to me.

The bus stopped at the bus station. I got off, quickly made my way to the window where bus tickets were sold, and asked for a ticket to Lhasa. They were sold out. I didn't know what to do. I sat down next to a column in the waiting room and considered my options.

After some time, a girl in a sleek black coat came over and said in Chinese, "Hello! Where are you going?" She seemed friendly and kind.

"I want to go to Lhasa, but the tickets have sold out," I replied.

She smiled and said, "I'm going to Lhasa. I'm just waiting for my friend to join me. We bought our tickets the day before yesterday."

"Great," I said, though I didn't feel great about it. I felt like she was gloating at my misfortune.

The girl then asked me in Chinese how to pronounce a few different words and have a simple conversation in Tibetan. I taught her a few bits and pieces of the language, introduced Lhasa and the Potala Palace, and described some other famous sites in Lhasa.

Time passed quickly. After it had been dark for some time, the girl left. I stayed in the ticket hall, and went back to pondering what to do. There weren't many people there in the hall – just me and a few old men. Some were smoking and chatting in Chinese. I couldn't understand most of what they were saying. I guess they were speaking their own dialect rather than the Chinese I had learnt at school.

After an hour or more had passed, I was still trying to come up with a solution to my predicament, when the Chinese girl in the sleek black coat reappeared. "My friend has been delayed and isn't going to arrive in time, so it looks like I'm left with an extra ticket. Do

you want it? Can I sell you her ticket?"

I looked at her carefully. I'd only just met her and was worried about her real motives. Was she a thief or a swindler? I gazed at her silently, trying to read her body language.

After a couple of seconds, I realized I had no way of knowing, so I asked, "How much is it?"

"Don't worry. I know you're a student. And since I'm a student too, I'll sell it to you cheaply. My friend paid 433 *yuan*, but you only need to give me 200. Is that OK?" she said.

I didn't even need to think about it for a second before fishing in my pocket and handing over the money. She gave me the ticket and said, "We're going to be on the same bus. Don't lose your ticket. I'll see you soon," and then she turned and left. I clutched the ticket tightly and thought about Lhasa.

Darkness deepened.

I walked outside and gazed at the bright, flashing lights of all colors that adorned buildings in every direction. Even the street lamps seemed brighter and more beautiful in comparison to my dusty hometown. After a while wandering around, I drifted back to the bus station.

A huge crowd was pouring out of the bus station. I pushed my way inside and looked around for the girl, but didn't see her anywhere. As the sea of unfamiliar faces swelled around me, I grew increasingly nervous, and continued scanning the crowd. Suddenly, a voice came from behind me, "What are you doing?"

I turned and saw the girl in the sleek black cloak pushing through the crowd. "The bus will leave soon. Get on now! Hurry!"

I followed her through the crowd and downstairs, and we boarded the bus to Lhasa together.

The bus was different from any I had ever been on before. Instead of seats, the bus was full of narrow bunk beds. There were three rows of beds across the bed, separated by two aisles. Each bed had its own number. Passengers crowded onto the bus, shuffling down the aisles, looking for their places. My bed was the top bunk, next to a window. The Chinese girl's bed was across the aisle to the left of mine, in the center of the bus.

"What's your name?" she asked as we settled into our beds.

"I'm Tashi," I replied.

"Many Tibetans are named Tashi. What does it mean?" she asked.

"It means something like 'lucky' or 'auspicious,'" I explained, as we pulled out of the station. We continued chatting as the bus travelled through the night.

After spending the night on the bus, we stopped in a small town as the sun was rising. Most passengers got off the bus and had breakfast, but I didn't. I took my school bag from under my pillow, brought out some *tsampa*, and began eating it, sitting on my bunk bed with my legs dangling into the aisle.

When the passengers returned, the girl asked, "Why didn't you come and eat breakfast with us?"

"I ate here," I answered.

She smiled silently, reached into her backpack, pulled out a few pieces of fruit, and offered them to me.

"No thanks," I said.

She put them on my pillow and said, "We're both students, and we should help each other."

As the bus rumbled out onto the road, she rolled over in her bunk, turned to me, and said, "What should I say when I first meet a Tibetan?"

I explained how to offer greetings in Tibetan, and then she asked me how to say simple things like, "What's your name?" "How are you?" "I like it here." "How old are you?" and "Goodbye."

Most passengers on the bus seemed not to know each other. Very few talked to each other. However, gradually, the Chinese girl and I spoke to each other more and more as time went on.

Three days later, we reached Lhasa in the morning. She asked, "What are you going to do this afternoon? If you have time, come to the Potala Park with me. I'll wait for you there."

"OK," I replied. I was eager to see the Potala Palace, because I hadn't seen it from the bus as we drove through town. I found a motorcycle taxi outside the bus station and zoomed off to Sera Monastery. Although I didn't know anyone there, I thought, "There

are many Amdo monks there. I'm sure I can find someone to ask for help."

Sera is a bit far from Lhasa City. After about half an hour on the motorcycle, I reached the foot of the big mountain where the monastery is located. I asked the first monk I saw to help me find a monk from Amdo. I had some trouble explaining myself to him, because he couldn't understand my dialect very well, but he eventually got the idea, and led me to the quarters of a young monk who was studying a Buddhist scripture when we entered. He said to the young monk, "Hey! Kalzang! Some guy from Amdo is looking for you."

"Oh! Come in, please," Kalzang replied.

I sat silently while the two monks chatted in Lhasa dialect. I couldn't understand most of what they were saying. Every now and then, the Amdo monk asked me a question in our dialect, and then resumed talking to the other monk in Lhasa dialect. Eventually, they finished their conversation, and the monk who had brought me to the room said, slowly and loudly, "OK, I'll go study. You two chat."

Kalzang offered me bread and *tsampa* and asked kindly, "Where in Amdo are you from?"

"I'm from Trika County Town," I lied.

"Is this your first time in Lhasa?" he asked.

"Yes, my first time," I answered.

"Great! Rest today. I have a debate class in the Philosophy College this afternoon. I'll take you to the Potala Palace to worship tomorrow," he said.

I thought about it for a second, and decided not to worry about meeting the girl from the bus. "Sure," I said, and put my backpack in the corner of the room.

The next day, he took me to see the Potala, the Jokang, and some of the temples in Sera, and introduced the images and scriptures in each temple. The whole time we were visiting, a stranger followed us from a distance. I guessed he was probably a thief, looking for a chance to rob us.

We had dinner in a small restaurant near Sera Monastery before returning to Kalzang's room, where we drank hot water and

chatted about our visit to the different temples. After a while, I mentioned the strange man I had seen following us. "I guess he was a thief," I said.

"No, I don't think so. I guess he was..." said Kalzang, and then stopped.

"Well? Who was he?" I asked,

"I don't know," he answered nervously.

We both fell quiet, and our conversation ended in awkward silence.

The next day, I went into one of the temples in Sera to worship. As I stood in the courtyard, catching my breath after making prostrations, a monk approached and said, "Hey, boy! Where are you from? If you've finished worshipping here, you should move on." Flustered, I left the temple and walked back to Kalzang's quarters, where I spent the rest of the day.

Three days later, I decided to move to a small hotel in Lhasa City. I had hardly any money, so I had to choose a cheap, rundown place. I could barely afford enough food to fill my stomach. I needed a job, and quickly. I went to many restaurants and shops, looking for any kind of work, but nobody would hire me.

After three days of looking for work, I finally found a restaurant that would pay me three meals a day. It was better than nothing, so I took it.

After working there for two weeks, the boss sent me to buy some butter. I bought it and, as I was coming back, I saw a nice piece of turquoise for sale at a shop in the Barkor. I picked it up, looked at it carefully, and asked, "How much is it?" in rapid Amdo dialect.

The storekeeper asked, "What?" in confusion.

"You are from Amdo!" a girl on my right suddenly said, speaking to me in my own dialect.

"Yes. I'm from Amdo. You too?" I replied.

"Oh! Are you a student? Did you run away from home?" she asked without answering my first question.

"I'm from Amdo, but I'm not a student," I said

"Don't lie. I know you are a student and that you've run away from home. There are many students here in Lhasa who have run

away from home, just like you," she said with a smile.

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I responded, shyly, "Yes, I'm a student." I was confused. I wondered how she knew so much about me.

She was wearing a short white polyester shirt, had an expensive-looking MP3 player, and wore fashionable sunglasses. Her clothes were clean. She had a lovely voice and spoke the Amdo dialect perfectly. She was also beautiful, and seemed kind.

"Do you like this turquoise?" she asked kindly.

"No," I replied.

"Then why were you looking at it so closely?" she said, looking into my eyes.

I didn't say anything.

"Where do you work?" she asked.

"At a Tibetan restaurant," I replied.

"How much do they pay you each month?" she asked.

"I only get three meals a day," I answered.

"What! They don't pay you anything? How strange! Don't get stuck in a hopeless situation like that. It's not difficult to find work here, especially for a student like you who knows Chinese. You can easily make money. Perhaps I can help you find a job," she suggested.

"Thanks!" I said, taken aback by her generosity.

We chatted for a bit longer and then she gave me her cell phone number. "If you need help, call me any time. My name's Wangmo," she said.

I quickly returned to the restaurant and immediately noticed that the boss had a bloodshot, swollen left eye. "What happened?" I asked.

"I ran into a wall," she said awkwardly.

The next day while having lunch, my boss said to me, "Tonight, I need you to sleep in the restaurant."

"OK," I answered.

Two girls worked in the restaurant with me. They usually slept in the restaurant but, later that afternoon, they explained, "There's going to be a big celebration tonight, and we want to go, so you and the boss's brother will sleep here."

They went out a little while later, leaving me and the boss's younger brother alone together. He was drinking beer and seemed very unhappy. "Where did my sister go?" he angrily asked.

"I don't know," I answered.

"Why don't you know? You must know. Tell me! Where is my sister?" he demanded.

There was something odd about him and his tone of voice. I thought he might be mentally disturbed. I'd seen him around before, but had never spoken to him. I wasn't really sure about him. I said, "Your sister is at home. Do you want me to take you there?"

"Sure," he said, and suddenly seemed happy. He stood up, and we started to leave, but when we got to the door of the restaurant, we found that it was locked from the outside.

We tried with all our strength to open the door, but it wouldn't move an inch. The more we shook the door, the more enraged he became. At first he was angry at the door, then his sister, but eventually, he became angry with me.

Later, when we were sitting together on the cot where he usually slept in the back of the restaurant, he sipped from a cup of hot water and looked at me strangely. Suddenly, he said, "Poor boy, you only have one night left to live." He kept staring at me, but every now and then, his eyes would dart towards the head of his bed.

I didn't say anything.

After what seemed like an eternity, he stood up and went off to the bathroom.

I leaned over, pressed down on his pillow, and felt something hard underneath. I slowly lifted the pillow and saw a cleaver. I didn't know what to do. I put the pillow back and then, after thinking for a second, I lifted the pillow, grabbed the cleaver, and pushed it under his bed, up against the wall where he couldn't easily reach it. Then, I stood up and quickly went into the kitchen, where I found a small knife, and hid it in my pocket. Finally, I ran back to his cot and sat exactly where I had been sitting before.

He came back, sat down, picked up a bottle of beer, and smiled at me as he took a swig. It wasn't a nice smile. I was terrified, but I didn't want him to know that. Suddenly he yelled, "Where's my

cleaver? Where'd you put it?"

I stood up and backed away, keeping my eyes fixed on him. I didn't say anything. He lunged at me, and I jumped behind a table. He lunged again, and ended up chasing me around the restaurant.

After a minute, he caught me. We grappled with one another. At some point, he grabbed me by the throat and started squeezing. As I stared into his cold, bulging eyes, I could feel the air in my lungs running out. I couldn't take another breath. I thrust my hand into my pocket, grabbed the knife, and desperately stabbed it into his leg, again and again as he screamed and squeezed my neck more tightly. Then he grabbed my hand and twisted it, forcing me to drop the knife.

He lunged forward and picked up the knife, releasing me in the process. I ran over and got the cleaver from under his bed. He looked at me and said, "Poor boy, now I'm going to kill you."

"I'll kill you if you come near me!" I yelled.

I ran to the front door and threw myself against it with all of my strength. Luckily, it burst open, and I rolled out into the street. Many people were crowded outside the door. They were surprised when they saw the blood on my hands and clothes.

"Not me! Him!" I cried, pointing inside.

"What happened? Tell us!" someone shouted.

"He's a lunatic! He tried to kill me," I replied, still gasping for breath, looking over my shoulder to see if he was following me.

"We know. He's insane. Get out of here, quickly!" someone said worriedly. I turned and ran without looking back. When I got to my hotel, I called my boss and the two girls and told them I was never going back.

The next morning, I phoned Kalzang and asked him to help me. I told him I didn't want to work in that restaurant again, but I really needed some sort of job. He was unable to help me, because he had been ordered not to leave his monastery. Not knowing what else to do, I called Wangmo and told her my problems. She said, "OK, don't worry. I'll be there soon."

After she arrived, we talked about what I should do. She said, "Don't worry about finding a job. I have some friends here. I'll ask

around and see what I can do. I'm sure I can find someone to help you."

I thanked her and then she went to work.

She came at noon the next day and said, "One of my friends has a job at a hotel for you. You can begin work there starting tomorrow. Here's the address. Go there first thing tomorrow morning."

When I heard this news, I happily thanked her.

She smiled, and said, "You're welcome."

I moved to the hotel the next morning. There seemed little for me to do. I mostly hung around the hotel and helped out with odd jobs. I was free most of the time. The boss was kind and the workers were friendly. I couldn't stop thinking about Wangmo. In fact, I had fallen in love with her.

One day, the boss of the hotel called me. I thought he had something for me to do but, when I arrived, he gave me 500 RMB and said, "Go buy some new clothes. This money is not your salary. After a full month, I'll give you your salary!"

I thanked him and, as I was leaving, I looked at the money and thought, "Why did he give me this money? Perhaps because all my clothes are so old and dirty? Or perhaps because I'm Wangmo's friend?"

Not knowing where to go, I called Wangmo. After greeting her, I said, "I want to buy some clothes. Do you have time to help me?"

"Sure. I don't need to work today and I don't want to stay at home. Where are you now?" she asked.

"In front of the hotel," I said,

"OK. Stay there. I'll be there soon," she said sweetly, and arrived half an hour later. She took me to a market where I bought a T-shirt decorated with the eyes of the Buddha, a light brown Nepali jacket, and a pair of camouflage pants. When I put on the new clothes, she looked at me and said, "You're so handsome!"

I smiled shyly, but said nothing.

When it was suppertime, I invited her to a restaurant. While we were eating, she asked me about my work. I described my work at the hotel, and explained that the hotel boss was kind to me.

"Wonderful!" she said.

After we chatted a bit longer, she went to her place and I returned to the hotel.

We continued to meet almost every day over the next two weeks. One day, she called me early in the morning and said, "Can you come to my place?"

I asked my boss for permission, and he dismissed me with a wave of his hand. On the way to her place, I bought a bag of rice and some vegetables. When I arrived, she said, "Why did you buy such things? I have enough food here. You shouldn't waste your money."

"I didn't waste my money," I replied.

"You like rice, right? I'll cook rice and some vegetable dishes for lunch," she said

Later, while we were eating, she said, "I called you today because I was feeling down."

We talked for a long time and then walked to the Potala. Even though it took two hours to walk there and back, the time flew by.

We bought some milk just before we got back to her place. "Let me heat that up for you," I said once we were inside her room. I poured the milk into a pot, boiled it, poured it into a bowl, and gave it to her.

She sipped it and said, "It's delicious." I guessed she was just saying that to make me happy. The weather soon turned cold, as dark, low-hanging, clouds covered the sun. We sat on her sofa looking at the pictures in one of her photo albums. She'd been to many places. After a while, she cooked dinner on a small stove in a corner of her room. While we were eating, it began raining.

"I want to leave before the rain gets any heavier," I said.

"You should wait. You can go after the rain stops," she replied.

We then talked about her past and my past, as the room slowly became dimmer. The night deepened and the rain continued.

Wangmo said, "Don't go back to the hotel tonight. I'll talk to your boss tomorrow. Don't worry!"

It was now after ten p.m. I told Wangmo a love story, and then we chatted about trivial things. Next, she told me a story, and then I told her a ghost story.

It was very late when she went to bed. I lay on the sofa. She read a Chinese book, while I read a newspaper. I soon turned off the light, but was unable to sleep. I kept thinking about Wangmo. At around midnight she called to me and said, "That ghost story made me very afraid. I can't sleep. Can you come here 'til I fall sleep?"

"Are you sure that's OK?" I asked.

"Why not?" she answered.

I went to her bed and lay down. We chatted very quietly, as the drizzle continued. Eventually, we ran out of things to say, and fell quiet. We both lay there stiffly, and then slowly moved nearer and nearer to each other. Soon, her right hand was on my chest. She patted me gently. I put my right arm around her neck and planted a kiss on her forehead.

Everything stopped. Just her and me. Me and her. Her and her smile for me. Only the two of us. In that quiet room, on that rainy night, she and I spent our first evening as lovers.

The next morning, someone knocked on the door. I was still in a dream, and wondered who had come. When she opened the door, it was only the postman bringing a newspaper.

She cooked breakfast as I lay in bed. I looked at her and thought, "This is like a family – a wonderful family." I was happy and at ease. I was overwhelmed with feelings of love and happiness that I could not express. We spent a blissful morning together, and then I went to work.

A few days later, I managed to get away from work, and Wangmo and I left for a short vacation, visiting a few famous places outside Lhasa. We enjoyed two romantic weeks together. After we returned, I called my parents, asked how they were, and then returned to work in the hotel. That night, Wangmo called me, and we chatted about her work for about an hour.

A few days later, as I was walking along Barkor Street, someone suddenly grabbed my shoulder and called out, "I found you!"

I turned. It was my uncle. I was speechless.

"What are you doing here?" he said angrily.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. My heart started racing and

my head began to swim. Before I could open my mouth to speak, I fainted onto the cold stone pavement.

When I woke up, I was lying on a bed in a hotel room. My parents were there, along with my uncle, and a monk from our hometown. Mother was weeping. Uncle glared at me and said, "We've spent nearly all our time in this room! It's so boring. We should be outside visiting temples and Lhasa City, but we don't know the way very well. Now that you're awake you can show us around, right?"

He was eager to visit places of interest, but the others didn't want to go anywhere. They were relieved just to see me again, and wanted to relax. I was unhappy and didn't say anything. I knew they would force me to return home, and then I would no longer be able to see Wangmo. I plodded around Lhasa, silently showing my uncle the sites.

Later, when we stopped for a short break, Uncle said, "Don't worry. You are young, and don't understand what you really want. You need to continue your schooling. Study hard. That's what's best for you."

I was sad and didn't know what to say, so I kept silent.

"Why are you so quiet?" Uncle asked.

I said nothing, as tears came from my eyes.

He said, "You have a girlfriend here, don't you?"

"Yes," I answered quietly. "I want to visit her now."

He looked at me quietly, and then finally said, "OK, let's go see her."

I took him to her place and told him to wait outside. I went inside and found her cooking. She smiled and said, "Sit down! I've almost finished making dinner. What would you like to drink?"

I couldn't bring myself to say anything. Tears dribbled from my eyes. She hugged me and asked, "What happened to you, dear?"

Slowly, I muttered, "I... have to go... back home. My parents... my parents came and found... found me today," I said.

"I knew this would happen, but I couldn't stop myself from falling in love with you," she said, as tears coursed unchecked down her cheeks.

"I love you, too. You're a good woman and have been so nice

to me. But, bad things happen..." I said.

"Yes, bad things happen, even to nice people," she said sadly.

I wiped away her tears and, just as I was about to say something, she hugged me tightly and sobbed loudly. It seemed she couldn't talk or breathe.

Finally, she wiped her tears away and said, "Don't be sad. Everything will be fine soon."

I wondered, "How can she be so kind to me? Why would she say that everything will be fine soon?"

We hugged again, and then she walked me to the door. It was very hard for me to say goodbye.

"Tashi, you must come now!" Uncle called from the street.

I didn't reply. Wangmo was very quiet.

I turned and walked away, choking back tears.

"Let's go," I said to Uncle. As we started to leave, a single tear fell from my right eye. Uncle saw that and stood in shock for a moment. Suddenly, he asked, "So, you really love her?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Can you live without her?" he asked seriously.

"I can't. We love each other," I replied sadly.

"If that's true, you can bring her back home with us. I'm not kidding," he said, quietly and kindly.

I looked at his face disbelievingly. I asked, "Are you sure?"

"Why not?" he answered.

"I'm afraid of my parents," I replied.

"Don't worry. I'll explain everything to them," he said.

I ran back to her room, but when I opened the door, the room was already empty. There was only a small, familiar piece of turquoise on the table.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Amdo, A mdo ང་མດ

Barkor, bar skor ບର୍କୋର

Jokang, jo khang བ୍ୟୁକ୍ଙ

Kalzang, skal bzang ཀାଲ୍ଚଙ୍

Lhasa, lha sa ལ୍ହାସା

Nyima Gyamtsan, nyi ma rgyal mtshan ཉମାଗ୍ୟାମ୍ତସାନ

Potala, po ta la དୋତାଲା

RMB 人民币

Sera, se ra ལ୍ହାରା

Tashi, bkra shis ད୍ରାଶି

Trika, khri ka ତ୍ରିକା

tsampa, *rtsam pa* ତ୍ରାପା

Wangmo, dbang mo དଙ୍ଗମୋ

yuan 元

Ziling, zi ling ཇଲିଙ୍